DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 698 UD 007 928

By-Berle, Adolf A.

Some Perspectives on the Politics and Organization of Education.

Pub Date Nov 68

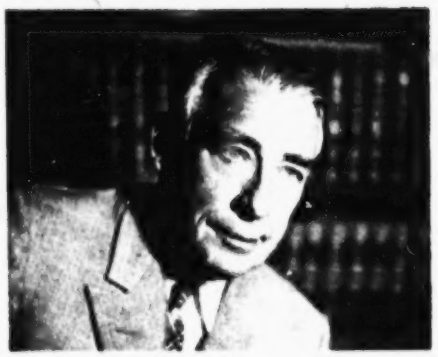
Note-13p.; Address presented at a Special Training Institute on Problems of School Desegregation (Teachers Coll., Columbia Univ., New York, N.Y., July 10-12, 1968)

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.75

Descriptors-*Administrator Responsibility, *Decentralization, Organizations (Groups), Political Power, Power Structure, *Race Relations, School Administration, School Community Relationship, *School Superintendents

Adolf A. Berle, a statesman and law professor, discusses the powers and responsibilities of the educational administrator. Emphasized is the belief that education must not be sacrificed to race relations militants, anti-war groups, or teachers' demands. Police force should be used when needed to prevent schools from becoming battlegrounds. Confrontations can be diminished if administrators initiate dialogues with parents in the community. (NH)

EDO 30698



Adolf A. Berle, an internationally known statesman and Professor Emeritus of Law at Columbia University, discusses from the perspective of his multi-faceted experiences the powers and responsibilities of the contemporary educational administrator. Professor Berle emphasizes his belief that the education of children must not be sacrificed to militant race-relations, anti-war or teacher groups "no matter how meritorious" their demands. He defends the use of police force, if necessary, to keep the schools from becoming battlegrounds and states that the likelihood of "force confrontations" can be diminished if educational officials will take the initiative in establishing a dialogue with parents in their communities. Professor Berle states that the realities of decentralization need reexamination so that dialogue with the constituency may be properly developed.

UD 007 928

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

SOME PERSPECTIVES ON THE POLITICS AND ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATION

Adolf A. Berle, Professor Emeritus of Law,
Columbia University

No apology is needed for considering educational institutions of our time as part of its structure of political institutions. Every Superintendent of Schools has known that for years. All school administrators have positions of power in great institutional hierarchies, which are organized and maintained to educate children. Many of them are faced with pressures, activist movements, and militant groups in their local communities--some of these groups even prepared to use force. In many cases, these movements are only secondarily interested in the teaching of children. Some want to stop the war in Viet Nam; some to change the base of race relations between whites and blacks; some to attack the phenomenon of poverty in a rich country. They move against schools and educational institutions because these are in easy reach, and because they offer possible enclaves of power which leaders of these movements would like to possess. Some activists would like

UD 007 928

to control schools and school systems as a source of jobs for their adherents; and some because thereby they can disseminate attitudes and ideas helpful to their purpose. These are the grim realities faced by many educational administrators, especially in big cities.

Paralleling these movements is a concern whether the education provided by our school system is as good and effective as it ought to be. This concern is directed, essentially, toward how and what the children are taught. The objectives of education are not questioned, but the accusation is made that in great areas it does not succeed in the task it has set for itself. This concern is legitimate. Real questions do exist, for example, whether our present educational apparatus can adequately educate children in the negro and ghetto areas. There is a good deal of evidence to support the proposition that the job is not being done as well as it should be.

Sharp distinction must be made, however, when dealing with groups who desire to change race relations between white and black; or change the power relations between the poor and the well-to-do or middle classes; or to make other reforms; and who want to take over control of the school system, or parts of it, as a strategic place to begin. The latter are prepared to make the schools a battleground--and the children in them cannon-fodder--for their point of view, even though the children's education is interrupted and obviously suffers in the process. Every school Superintendent

in any substantial city knows exactly how this works.

Attempt to develop or improve school instruction--a legitimate and continuing concern of all of us--is frequently used by some other group as a lever to advance its own power position.

One attempt to improve the technique of school administration, and instruction with it, will serve as illustration. This is the movement towards "decentralization" presently popular in some areas, including New York City. This principle appeals to me, as it does to many other people, but its realities need examination.

"Decentralization" has at its base an attempt to reconnect schools with the local "communities" they originally served. Schools in America were developed by and out of small communities, or identifiable community-organized areas in larger cities. The little red schoolhouse and the village schools in rural areas were paralleled more or less by grammar and high schools closely connected with identifiable areas in large cities. I am old enough to have had experience with both. The New Hampshire rural school where I spent some of my childhood was an outgrowth and expression of a small town; was financed by it; was controlled by it; and operated as an integral part of the town's social life. At present it is fashionable to denigrate the quality of those village schools, yet in their time and context they did an excellent job. I also remember the school system in an outlying part--the Alston

district--of Boston, Massachusetts. It was included in a great city and a large school system--but the school itself was an integral part of a local section having recognizable structure and identity. There also the community expressed itself through the school, and acknowledged responsibility for education in matters of social customs and discipline as well as academic content. "Decentralization" in today's phrase represents an attempt to recapture that identification of community with schools. Attempt is being made now, in New York City, to decentralize--with just that in mind.

Unfortunately for the experiment, conditions have radically changed. The old "communities" have ceased to exist in some areas. In others, they have wholly changed character. In many places the old "neighborhoods" have vanished; in others, only vestiges of them still remain. Remanding the schools to local "communities" placed on the school authorities, including school principals, the problem of finding the relevant "community"; or, if there was none, of attempting to create one. The problem has proved far harder than anyone suspected. Devices for doing so have been developed: Parent-Teacher Associations, local school community associations, community councils and the like. Unquestionably there are areas in which "communities" still do exist. Perhaps in most areas within which schools operate, there are remains of old neighborhood structures. This may be brought back into being. But it is absurd to pretend that--at least in cities--these have the coherence

and consensus of the communities of a generation ago.

Even rural communities no longer live within themselves: their habits of visiting, maintaining friendships, buying and recreation, have been modified by automobiles and may cover an area of fifty miles' radius. Their ideas and thinking no longer center on local churches; they are more likely to revolve around prime time television programs distributed by national media organizations and (in ghastly fact) ultimately dictated by big advertisers. Districts in the midst of big cities are in even greater flux. Their populations shift and change. There is no necessary neighbor-relation between an apartment dweller and the next-door family. In middle class areas a man's job often includes the possibility that he may be transferred to some other city every three or four years; so that community roots, at best, are shallow.

Groups frequently emerge claiming to speak for the "community"--and very often there is no organized community to challenge their claim. The school officials then must endeavor to communicate with the parents of their children, discovering the individuals or organizations representing their true constituency. Otherwise, schools become merely hurricane centers for contending elements. The realities of "decentralization" need reexamination so that dialogue with the constituency may be properly developed.

Another problem thrusting into every school district is that of race relations. More than ten years ago the

Supreme Court directed that schools be desegregated--that they should include both white and black students. Educational doctrine supported this conception. A whole system of law and administration has been built on it. But today powerful black groups, sometimes with a measure of white support, demand almost the exact opposite. Some insist that black children are entitled to an education based on projection of black personality, black history and black culture by black teachers. These conflicting demands are incompatible; no school superintendent can possibly satisfy both. The conflict pushes itself into some areas where "decentralization" is attempted. If the district is predominantly Negro, school principals--they have unwillingly become field commanders in their areas--are faced with demands that they hire only Negro teachers, sometimes accompanied by threat of physical entry into and seizure of the school if the demands are not met. As a result, one school in New York City is presently closed down. The children the school is there to serve go untaught. Groups seeking power are prepared to sacrifice the interest of children in order to get it.

The evidence is enough--and more than enough--to justify the proposition that the task of a school Superintendent is in part political--using that word in its non-partisan sense. He will need a set of principles to guide his decisions.

There are, I believe, five principles of power.

They apply to the power-position of a school Superintendent or a school principal just as much as to a president, a prince or a governor. They are these:

First: Power moves in to avoid chaos; that is the first function.

Second: Power is always personal--it is always lodged in and exercised by men.

Third: Power always operates through institutions--in this case, school systems--and is usually placed by the institution in the hands of the man or men who administer it.

Fourth: Power is always accompanied by and acts by virtue of a philosophy. In this case, American philosophy calls for education of children, and the school system is there to accomplish that purpose.

Fifth: Power always acts in the presence of a field of responsibility and carries on a dialogue, organized or unorganized, with that field. A school Superintendent has a defined city or area. The people in it who are affected by the school operation are his field of responsibility. Some sort of dialogue, orderly or sometimes disorderly, goes on between the administrator and elements in that field all the time. In extreme cases, the dialogue may be between a principal and an activist group forcibly demanding possession of the school. Less dramatically, it goes on as a running discussion between school administrators and more or less organized groups having or claiming to have interest in the school system.

Applied to the area of a school administrator's power and responsibility, I think it will be found that these five rules fit.

However, application of these laws commonly arises in reverse order. The first problems are likely to come up in the field of the dialogue. When a decision is made, a regulation is put into effect, a policy is changed, something

is going to be said or written. Some reaction, favorable or unfavorable, is bound to appear. The first choice is whether to wait for the reaction and reply to it--or whether at outset state the case for the action through the most appropriate medium of communication. That might be through a release to the newspapers, or in a speech to the appropriate association, or through a communication to the local governing power--or possibly all three at once. In routine matters the point may not be important--a simple bulletin sent out to schools and teachers may be sufficient. But in controversial affairs the right decision may be vital. At this point the administrator has his chance to frame the debate--and setting the terms of the debate may well be crucial.

No generalized advice is possible--but my own impression is that the administrative officer is usually more effective if he leads off the discussion, analyzes the guts of the problem and states the exact issues involved. For example, he can make clear that the thing he is doing or about to do is designed to assure that pupils get taught--the senior and controlling objective for which he is appointed. He can separate that issue from the other issues involved--which may be race relations, teachers' pay, pacifist instruction, or whatever. He can point out, for example, that while obviously race relations need to be improved and put on a better basis, no school administrator has either right or mandate to sacrifice the interests of

the children while this is being done. By starting the discussion, he can take an affirmative position in favor of his children; asking for the support of the institution he represents, of the public his schools serve, and of the government that appointed him as he endeavors to carry out the precise purpose for which he was given power. This requires any objecting groups to defend what they are doing--which in civilized debate of course they should. Getting the case clearly stated at the outset is half the battle when controversy impends.

Unjustified controversy has been generated about this. It is said, rightly, that police ought not to be in schools; but the moment public order in or out of the schools is challenged, it must be restored. Contention is made that if the school or its personnel require police protection, something is wrong with the school--which does not at all follow. If a mob, strike, or other organization, or a group of juvenile delinquents attempts to make a school into a battleground, the children, as well as the principal and teachers are entitled to protection. The city or district government is responsible for providing it. The certainty that force will be met by greater force is the best deterrent. But it is also true that a well-developed and well-handled dialogue, bringing about a large measure of local support, can diminish the likelihood of force confrontations and discourage challenges to order.

Next, any administrator in power is bound to uphold

the integrity of the institution that put him in power. If change or reform is needed, he can say so and possibly initiate it. What he cannot do is surrender control over the institution, or any part of it--except by virtue of an institutional decision.

This is the precise difference between evolution and revolution. I know there is dissent in this field. There are protagonists of revolutionary change as well as of progress. I myself disagree with the doctrine, but--in any case--the option is not open to a powerholder. He can--he may--advocate change in institutional decisions, or change in methods of institutional operation. But it is not for him to alter them; still less to surrender the structure until change has been enacted by lawful authority. Until that has been done, he must execute the mandate he has even if he believes in and advocates its change.

Finally, and of supreme importance, he must maintain and support the philosophy on which his institution is based. His highest duty is determined by that philosophy. If we assume, as I have here, that the philosophy of any school system requires that the children encompassed in it shall be educated, then his loyalty, his decisions and his actions are determined by that fact. He cannot yield to any invasion of it. I am aware this may bring him into conflict with powerful organized force--for example, a teachers' union calling a strike, or a militant group seeking to staff a school. Most such strikes are illegal;

but--legal or not--they do involve sacrificing the welfare of the children's education to some interest other than that of assuring the children's education.

This proposition will be disputed. Groups interested in race relations will say that children are badly educated until these relations are adjusted. Some militant groups insist that until the white man shrives his soul for past historical guilt, no education is sound. Teachers will insist that until their demands are met children can not be well taught. Militant anti-war groups will maintain that until some particular activity they object to is remedied, children's education suffers. Therefore, they contend, they are entitled to interrupt school operations until their demands are satisfied. Conceding good intention, even allowing a measure of truth in their contentions and assuming reforms may be desirable, it nevertheless is unanswerable that during the struggle the children suffer. Indeed, these groups desire that they shall suffer, in order to obtain political or other leverage toward compelling satisfaction to the group's demands.

The dialogue associated with power must make the issues as clear as humanly possible. Schools are there to see that children shall be taught and trained; we all know what happens to untaught and untrained children. Doing that job is exacted by the philosophy that brought school systems into existence. Defending the institution's capacity to do the job is, I concede, the ultimate task and responsibility

of its administrators.

Attitudes need not and indeed often should not be rigid. There are few institutions--schools included--which are perfect. Very many changes can be made for their improvement. Many may require greater measure of support, financial and moral, by the city or community served, by its government, and by its taxing authorities. School administrators have the right and the duty to point out what changes and improvements are needed, and to ask that the costs be met. But no administrator can hand over all or any part of his power to anyone else, until authorized to do so by competent action of his community's government.

My field is political and social science, not education, therefore my comments have dealt with the political and social aspects of a school administrator's job. The law of being of an educator--from which he derives the power he holds--requires him to put the education of children first; it demands of him that he protect that trust from advocates of any other interest--no matter how meritorious that interest may be.